

Miss Teen USA Gives Back to Pendleton Place – The Greenville News 8.21.14



(Photo: Heidi Heilbrunn , Staff)

K. Lee Graham isn't in Chapin in the Midlands of South Carolina any more.

The 17-year-old high school student, who visited Greenville on Wednesday, will spend her senior year traveling the country as Miss Teen USA, promoting her Live Beautifully campaign, focused on developing character and inner beauty.

Graham, currently ranked No. 1 in her high school class, will complete her remaining two classes online before starting at the New York Film Academy, to which she received a scholarship along with the Miss Teen USA title.

Graham is the first South Carolina titleholder to take home the crown since 1998, when Vanessa Minnillo won the national title.

Graham arrived back home in South Carolina this week after a whirlwind three weeks in the Bahamas and New York City.

After being crowned at the Atlantis Paradise Island resort, she was thrown into her new life, doing interviews and appearances, spending time with Miss USA Nia Sanchez and Miss Universe Gabriela Isler, and meeting her new boss, business magnate and Miss Universe Organization owner Donald Trump.

Graham will soon begin crisscrossing the country, speaking to schools about Live Beautifully and studying acting at the New York Film Academy.

While Graham's senior year will be far from typical, she said she got a lot of the typical senior year experiences as a junior at Chapin High School, where she took many classes alongside seniors.

"I'm excited for this year," Graham said during a stop at *The State* newspaper. "I was very ready to start a new experience in life."

Graham was crowned Miss South Carolina Teen USA in November, a year after she placed fourth runner-up in the competition. What made the difference this time around, she said, was knowing what kind of impact she wanted to make if she won the title.

"I realized it doesn't stop the night you're crowned. If you're Miss Teen USA, it lives on for years, for possibly a lifetime, and I had to understand what message I wanted to leave behind," Graham said.

Her mother, Jennifer, was Miss South Carolina Teen USA 1985, and helped coach her through the years, making her gowns and preparing her for the interview portion of pageants.

"Before I was Miss South Carolina Teen USA, I never had any coaches. I took a few runway classes, but that was it," Graham said. "It was very much a mother-daughter thing." Growing up, she didn't always feel glamorous. She says she was "nerdy" and studious, though she was attracted to pageants as a young teenager.

"Even though I was nerdy, I was still girly and I loved feeling beautiful for a day," Graham said. "Then, I realized the voice you can have and the impact you can make and that really motivated me to keep competing."